

IN THE CLAIMS:

Please CANCEL claims 1-19 without prejudice to or disclaimer of the recited subject matter.

Please AMEND claim 20 and ADD new claim 21, as follows. For the Examiner's convenience, all claims currently pending have been reproduced below.

1-19. (Canceled)

20. (Currently Amended) A near-field exposure apparatus comprising:

a light source;

a stage on which an object to be exposed to light is placed; and

a deformable membrane portion having on one surface of the membrane portion a shielding membrane that has a micro aperture; and

a substrate for supporting a peripheral region of the other surface of the membrane portion,

wherein exposure is conducted with the membrane portion in a sagged condition and the photomask is designed to have a structure so as to relieve a stress that is generated at a border between the membrane portion and the substrate when the membrane portion sags, and the structure is one selected from the following:

(a) a structure comprising a reinforcing member placed at the border,

(b) a structure such that the substrate is partially thinned near the border, and

(c) a structure comprising an intermediate layer that is formed between the substrate and the other surface of the membrane portion and stretches toward a center of

~~the other surface of the member portion composed of a substrate and a membrane portion, the membrane portion being supported by the substrate and having on one side of the membrane portion a shielding membrane that has a micro aperture;~~

~~wherein the shielding membrane is brought into close contact with the object placed on the stage so that the object is irradiated with light from the light source through the shielding membrane for exposure, and~~

~~wherein the photomask has a structure for relieving stress that is generated in the border between the membrane portion and the substrate when the membrane portion is sagged.~~

21. (New) A near-field exposure photomask comprising:

a deformable membrane portion having on one surface of the membrane portion a shielding membrane that has a micro aperture; and

a substrate for supporting a peripheral region of the other surface of the membrane portion,

wherein exposure is conducted with the membrane portion in a sagged condition and the photomask is designed to have a structure so as to relieve a stress that is generated at a border between the membrane portion and the substrate when the membrane portion sags, and the structure is one selected from the following:

- (a) a structure comprising a reinforcing member placed at the border,
- (b) a structure such that the substrate is partially thinned near the border, and
- (c) a structure comprising an intermediate layer that is formed between the substrate and the other surface of the membrane portion and stretches toward a center of the other surface of the member portion.